

Reviewing Reagan's Reviewers

By IRVING KRISTOL

I see that America's political scientists, at their annual Labor Day conclave, were giving very poor grades to the Reagan administration. Giving grades, of course, is something that comes easily to professors. The fact that Ronald Reagan is not one of their registered students and never bothered to ask them for a report card is deemed to be irrelevant. Equally irrelevant, apparently, are election results, which political scientists have the expertise to explain away. The academics assembled in New Orleans were determined to let the Reagan administration know its record was such as to disqualify it even for a football scholarship.

One doubts that the White House paid much attention. The polls show that two-thirds of the American people think Ronald Reagan is doing a good job. This is an extraordinarily high proportion for the fifth year of an administration. In contrast, one can assume that 90% of those political scientists voted for Walter Mondale. This would, on some other occasion, provide a useful point of departure for speculation as to why academic opinion is so at odds with common opinion. But what does give this schism its more immediate political significance is the fact that the Washington press corps—print and television—so faithfully reflects the views of their erstwhile teachers.

It is a reasonably safe bet that some 90% of the Washington press corps have never voted for Ronald Reagan. They are liberal, to one degree or another. Indeed, they do not, in personal conversation, deny this—though they go on to insist that they are "objective" in their reportage, resolutely guarding against "liberal bias." They are not insincere in this claim—only self-righteously ingenuous.

Liberal Premises

"Objectivity" and "bias" in news reporting is a question of perspective. The Washington Post believes it is being "objective" when it is evenhanded in its treatment of the Soviet Union and the United States of America, giving equal credibility to the statements of Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Reagan. If you take it for granted that it is the moral responsibility of the American government in Washington to move the nation toward greater equality of wealth and income—a crucial liberal premise—then the absence of any such movement is a mark of "failure." If you also take it for granted—and this is another major liberal premise—that an administration in Washington can, if only it wished, cure all our social problems, from AIDS to teen-age unwed motherhood to cocaine addiction, then their continued existence is clear evidence that the administration has "failed" to live up to its responsibilities.

Essentially, the Washington press corps are moderately egalitarian and strongly statist in their economic, social and political attitudes. This set of attitudes is what liberalism comes down to in our day and age. And it explains why this very popular administration gets such bad academic grades and such a poor press.

But it is not only liberals who are giving vent to strong dissatisfaction with the Reagan administration. Many conservatives are expressing disappointment with its apparent timidity in foreign affairs and its neglect of the conservative social agenda. This upsurge of criticism has caused most commentators in Washington to assert

with solemn assurance that the Reagan administration, in its second term, has been cunningly moving toward the "center" of the political spectrum. Since they know that Mr. Reagan is not a candidate for reelection, they are at a loss for an explanation of this supposed shift. (Deep down, all Washington journalists are convinced that everyone, always, must be running for something.) Nor does it cause them to modify their view that this is a "right-wing" administration. Both opinions, after all, can be expressed on different days, in the context of different stories.

It is all very confusing. Unnecessarily so, in my view. That liberals will be irritated or even outraged by a conservative administration ought to surprise no one.

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One does wish that they had a higher threshold of indignation in general, so that they could think more clearly about American politics, but such a threshold would call their liberal credentials into question. Indignation is the mark of true sincerity in the liberal temperament.

That conservatives will be disappointed in a conservative administration also ought to surprise no one—especially not conservatives, who are supposed to have a sense of history, with a natural inclination toward the longer view. I must admit that, as a conservative, I share in this disappointment, but I also try to keep it under control. I really do not think it is sensible for conservatives to compete with liberals in the shrill-indignation business—at least not in current American circumstances. I could easily understand conservatives in Britain or West Germany becoming bitter at their conservative governments, which threaten to bring conservatism itself into disrepute. But that is not the case of the Reagan administration, which has actually helped legitimate conservatism as a political pre-disposition.

Conservative criticism is always in order, but a mood of sour disaffection, verging on alienation, now visible in conservative ranks is uncalled for. The management of disappointment is something that conservatives ought to be better at than liberals, since their level of political expectations is (or surely ought to be) so much lower. Great expectations are the peculiarly liberal vice in politics, and immunity to this vice is the essence of conservatism.

In fact, and keeping everything in perspective, the Reagan administration has done fairly well. Its economic policies have brought inflation down from 13% to 4%, unemployment down from over 10% to 7%. I do not know of a single liberal economist who predicted that Mr. Reagan's policies could achieve these effects. For six years they have been forecasting calamity while

insisting that no one should be given credit for its inexplicable postponement.

To be sure, the large budget deficit is a serious problem—though this is surely the first time in history that the American Political Science Association has thought so. But that deficit is the consequence of congressional irresponsibility. The government's revenues have increased to a level quite accurately foreseen by the Office of Management and Budget back in 1981. What OMB did not foresee was Congress's insistence that spending grow 8% to 10% a year, even as inflation and unemployment receded. That is our budget problem, not the 1981 tax cut. It is Tip O'Neill's deficit, not Ronald Reagan's.

Even in foreign policy, where conservative criticism has considerable substance, the Reagan administration has not done all that badly. In both El Salvador and Nicaragua, we are being more successful than most observers thought possible. We did show some spunk in Grenada, we did get out of UNESCO, and the Strategic Defense Initiative may turn out to be the most significant foreign-policy event of the post-World War II decades. Yes, much that could have been done has been left undone, and our State Department is still infused with liberal-internationalist illusions. But this amounts to saying nothing more than that the Reagan administration has not inaugurated any kind of serious "conservative revolution."

Indeed it has not, though—and this is its real significance—it may have laid the groundwork for one. The administration is what it is because Ronald Reagan is what he is: half traditional conservative, half "populist" and "new" conservative. The Republican Party has these two souls battling for its body, and it is the crucial conflict in American politics today.

'Great Game of Politics'

The Democratic Party—like the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe—is now the "safe," alternative party, a role long assigned to Republicans. It has no agenda, and the only "new" idea it has come up with recently is old-fashioned protectionism. It will gain office, and remain in office, only so long as the Republican Party is dominated by people who think that a balanced budget is more important than full employment, and that political compromise with liberal Democrats is an integral part of the "great game of politics." Only when the "Young Turks" in Congress—who believe that the game is there to be won, not tied—gain supremacy, only when we have a "conservative revolution" in the Republican Party, can we envisage something approaching a "conservative revolution" in American politics.

I believe this supremacy will be achieved. It is not the Bob Doles or the Pete Domenicis who are attracting young people to the Republican Party. It is the Jack Kemps, Newt Gingrichs, Bob Kasten, and the "populist" version of Ronald Reagan. When people like that dominate the party, one will be able to look back at the Reagan administration and see it for what it was: an intermediate administration, a necessary prelude that struck the themes to be amplified later.

Mr. Kristol is the John M. Ohm professor of social thought at the NYU Graduate School of Business and a senior fellow of the American Enterprise Institute.